Arab Images in American Comic Books

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Stereotyped images and activities will not be used to degrade specific national, ethnic, cultural, or socio-economic groups.
—The Code of the Comic Association of America

Until now, the analysis of Arab portraits in American comic books has been a virtual cipher, ignored by scholars. This essay will focus on Arab caricatures in comics beginning in the early 1950s to the present. Of the 218 Arab types appearing in the 215 comics studied, the author found 249 characters shown as "commoners." Interestingly, not a single Arab heroine or hero was featured.

The 30 Arab types the author has classified as "moderates" are almost without exception, passive and play minor roles. In other words, the comic book reader *never* sees an Arab "fighting the good fight." A common portrayal of a moderate Arab is as a benevolent monarch who enlists the heroes' help to save his people. We see the Arab in a few opening frames explaining his troubles to westerners. Then, he disappears, surfacing again in the final frames.

Villains dominate scenarios. They fall into one of three categories: the repulsive terrorist, the sinister sheikh or the rapacious bandit. All caricatured men and women come with their own distorted sex roles. In comics, one is about as likely to find a good Arab as the camel is to pass through the eye of a needle. Zestfully, Arabs wade into personal combat against our gallant figures, spitting upon them and deriding them. They carry out acts of torture with Mephistophelian glee. Their features are frequently bestial, demonized and dehumanized. Their faces drip with hatred and fanaticism. Megalomaniacal, with no social consciousness, storytellers show them eager to slay soldier and civilian alike. They are anti-American, anti-West, anti-Israel, anti-Jewish, anti-Christian. Despising freedom and democracy, they give their allegiance to tyranny and servitude. They oppress women from all lands. They are uncouth, unclean, unkempt; their clothes soiled and too smelly, even for apes. The following examples, most of which are taken from 1980s publications, serve as representative portraits of the comic book Arab.

Arab as Terrorist

At least 50 instances of Arab terrorist activity were recorded; terrorists are the most favored subject of writers and illustrators. They portray Arabs as fanatics who wish to subjugate the western world through a reign of terror. Consider the following portraits.

Batman: A Death in the Family (Starlin). This four-part series begins as the Joker escapes from a mental hospital. He plans to sell Arab terrorists a nuclear Cruise missile and concludes a nuclear arms deal with Jamal, the terrorist leader. One of the Joker's entourage asks, "You get the money from these BANDITS-IN-BEDSHEETS?" Jamal appears overweight and double-chinned, his mouth permanently fixed in a sneer. Other Arabs are sketched with unkempt facial hair, brandishing weapons. Jamal is prepared to fire his new toy missile immediately. His intended target? Tel Aviv!

Batman foils Jamal's scheme to destroy the Israeli city, but the Joker escapes and, subsequently, meets the Ayatollah Khomeini who offers him the job of Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations. Ever the opportunist, the Joker accepts. Garbed in Arab headdress and robe, he addresses the United Nations General Assembly:

I am proud to speak for the great Islamic Republic of Iran. That country's current leaders and I have a lot in common: insanity and a great love of FISH. But, unfortunately, we also share a MUTUAL PROBLEM. We get NO RESPECT. Everyone thinks of Iran as the home of the TERRORIST ZEALOT! They say even worse things about ME, would you believe? We've both suffered unkind ABUSE and BELITTLEMENT! WELL, WE AREN'T GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE!! You'll no longer be allowed to kick us around. In fact, you aren't going to be able to kick ANYONE around ever again!

The Joker then proceeds to rip off his costume and gas the entire chamber. Fortunately, Batman saves the day by inhaling the toxic fumes.

Thus, Arabs are equated with terrorists who are equated with Iranians who are equated with Batman's insane arch-nemesis, the Joker. This is the most prevalent of the themes involving Arabs in comic books, that is—Arabs [Them] vs. the West [Us].

In *Mark Hazard: Merc "Cestus Dei"* (Morrow and Colletta) Arab terrorists in Northern Lebanon capture Father Capistran, a priest on a quest to find the "Ring of the Fisherman." The bearded and brutal Arabs slay 12 of the priest's companions while kidnapping him without apparent reason. The church enlists Mark Hazard, an American mercenary, to free Father Capistran from the terrorists' clutches.

Hazard eventually tracks down the villains to an abandoned church. They have chained Father Capistran against the church wall, arms outspread, just beneath a giant cross. The symbolism is obvious. "Let's do our job!" yells one of Hazard's buddies as the heroes open fire. They slay scores of Arabs. The terrorist leader then puts his gun to Father Capistran's head, threatening to kill him if Hazard's group does not retreat. Says the priest: "No! Do not believe him! He and his are all liars!" Hazard hurls a knife into the villain's neck, killing him. Arabs here are seen as not only anti-West but anti-Christian.

In *The Punisher: Nuclear Terrorists Over Times Square* (Baron) a group of Arabs steal a kilo of plutonium. The object of their theft? To "blow a hole in the American dream." Enter Rose, an Israeli Secret Service agent, whose parents were killed by fanatical terrorists (presumably Arab) when she was 16. In an effort to stymie the lunatics, Rose links up with the American superhero, Punisher. She explains that the terrorist's leader is a Muslim fanatic called "Yassir."

The political message implicit in *The Punisher* is clear. Rose, who represents Israel, is the victim. She is young, beautiful and spirited. Like the State of Israel, she is a rose, just beginning to bloom, but full of thorns for those who threaten her. She is also a victim of Arab aggression, both as a child and as an adult. Yassir and Ahmed, the terrorist leaders, represent the Palestinians (one cannot help but think of "Yasser Arafat") and the rest of the Arab world. Both appear as terrible, brutally violent types. Both are anti-West (whose values are "garbage") while Rose, the representative of the Israelis, fights the good fight—she is one of us.

In *Action Comics* (Byrne and Kupperberg) Superman and Checkmate team up to foil Arab terrorists who have hijacked an American nuclear aircraft carrier in Metropolis harbor. Suddenly, Checkmate bursts on the scene, taking the "Fist of Allah" and his black-clad Angels by surprise. Metropolis and the entire Eastern seaboard are safe for another day.

At comic's end, Checkmate escorts Khareemali, the Quracan defense minister to his private plane. The superhero says: "There he goes—the man RESPONSIBLE for God knows how many deaths...SCOT-FREE!" He is angry that Khareemali cannot be disposed of in America. But Checkmate and his companions have a solution. Says one: "HAH! That towel-headed bozo will never know what hit him!" As Khareemali's plane passes over international waters, Checkmate pushes a button and the jet explodes, the sheikh CA-REEMED.

This is the point of the comic: to ca-reem Ali, to ca-reem the Arabs, to defame and degrade them. To the imagemaker, it is perfectly

acceptable (even praiseworthy) to blow up a plane with Arabs but a heinous act of terror to slay other racial or ethnic groups in a similar fashion. A double standard? You bet.

Arab as Sinister Sheikh

With their dark sunglasses, white headdresses and scruffy beards, the comic sheikhs vary little in the malevolence of their aspiration to world domination. Sheikh Ahmed Azis of Moon Knight "Fist of Khonshu" (Zelenetz) is a model example. The sheikh is a Kuwaiti megalomaniac obsessed with restoring Egypt's ancient empire. "Soon ANUBIS THE JACKAL shall reign as pharaoh supreme...And all the world shall bow to me—or die," he states, as harem maidens place the golden head of Anubis on his head.

To save the world from Sheikh Azis, Mark Spector, a red-headed American who was once the superhero Moon Knight, must recover the magical statue of Khonshu, the ancient Egyptian god of the moon and guardian of mankind. In the desert, Spector is waylaid by Arab assassins on camels. An Arab with a dagger in each hand attacks, but Spector, albeit weaponless, outduels the assassin. Spector makes his way to the sheikh's palace, where he is forthwith captured and mummified. Death appears imminent. But then the full moon rises and the spirit of the ancient Egyptian god Khonshu fills Moon Knight with power. With the aid of a giant sandstorm, the hero vanquishes the sheikh. The comic ends with Moon Knight standing alone in the desert, the moon high and full above his head, the ankh glowing golden upon the chest of his costume "...I guess for the time being, Khonshu...I owe you one" he says.

What is interesting about "Khonshu" is that despite the fact that the American hero derives his power from an ancient Egyptian god, there is not a single good Egyptian in the entire comic.

In *Fantastic Four "Fasaud!"* and "Danger From the Air" (Englehart-Buscema) the reader meets a super villain, Sheikh Farouk Al-Fasaud, who was at one time the driving force behind OPEC. Sheikh Fasaud attacks a CBS correspondent with a dagger but misses, striking instead a nearby television camera and thereby electrocuting himself.

The jolt transforms Fasaud into a being half TV image, half lunatic, but at all times 100 percent Arab—his white headdress inseparable from his hideous face. The transformed Fasaud goes after Gregory Dunbar, the correspondent he had failed to kill. The Fantastic Four speed to the CBS building to find Fasaud attempting to electrocute Dunbar. A battle quickly commences, in which Fasaud's image is "disrupted" by the Fantastic Four and Dunbar is saved. Next, the Fantastic Four split up: half travel to Fasaud's home kingdom of Aquiria to destroy the villain,

the others remain in New York to protect Dunbar. In Aquiria they are met by his majesty, Sheikh Khafir. Khafir warmly welcomes the Fantastic Four. As they walk through the desert, the Thing comments on the great number of oil wells on the horizon. "Of course," answers Khafir, "that is why Fasaud was the RICHEST MAN IN THE WORLD." "Yeah, I REMEMBER the long lines at the gas stations!" answers the Thing. In Aquiria, Fasaud surprises the Thing and Ms. Marvel. He electrocutes both; the superheroes fall unconscious. The comic ends with King Khafir not condemning, but congratulating "the epic villainy of Fasaud" for a job well done. "You've saved my kingdom once AGAIN, my trusted friend," says Khafir.

One would hope to find more sympathetic sheikhs in a comic released by the family-oriented Walt Disney Co. In *Uncle Scrooge* "The Golden Fleecing" (Disney) the opposite is true. Uncle Scrooge appears at the tailor's looking for a garment made entirely of gold. An Arab with a horrible dog-like snout, dressed in a robe and headdress, spies upon them. As McDuck travels home, moneybag in hand, he notes the "creature" following him. Scrooge flees, yelling, "It's the evil-looking foreigner who was in the tailor shop! He's up to no good! I can tell by his looks!" Eventually the sheikh-sketched-as-dog convinces Scrooge to come aboard his ship where they will conduct a business deal. The "dog-sheikhs" are clothed in headdresses and robes; they possess horrible, black tipped-noses, pointed black beards, and huge, black brows. The fact that these "men" are actually "women," the daughters of the Queen of Seikral, is intended to add insult to an already racist depiction. As Mr. McDuck is introduced to them, the sheikhs wring their hands in greed, anticipating a quick buck. Closing in on Scrooge their noses sniffing, the dog/men/women salivate. "Mr. McDuck is very, very rich!" says one. "M'mm!" says another. "Smell the money!" cries the third, grinning. "I didn't come here to be SNIFFED AT! I came to talk BUSINESS!" yells Scrooge, miffed. "Gir—I mean BOYS! Mr. McDuck wants to know our price for guiding him to the GOLDEN FLEECE!" says Seikral Ali. In answer the gleeful sheikhs form a circle, saying: "He's rich enough for our purpose!" and "Hee! Hee!"

Will Uncle Scrooge survive the terrible fate that awaits him or will his nephews surface in time to save him? The comic ends, leaving the climax for another issue. One can assume that the bearded sons—I mean, daughters—of the Queen of Seikral will get their due.

Bandits

The bandit image most prevalent is that of a killer: dirty, backward, and anti-West.

In T-Man "The Red Riffs of Morocco" ace T-man Pete Trask flies over Morocco towards Algiers. He's the bodyguard for the American diplomat who is carrying NATO plans for the defense of the Mediterranean against the Nazis. Makaco, leader of an Arab group, orders his men to open fire on the aircraft. The bandits rush the downed plane, firing indiscriminately at its occupants. Trask reaches the "mob of apes" first, fists pumping. The T-man laments: "These hill bandits are like mountain goats in this terrain...maybe hundreds of them." Trask's fears are realized when, moments later, he is jumped by Arabs and taken prisoner. Trask escapes, the bandits follow, but are eventually thwarted in their pursuit when Trask destroys the bridge separating them.

Tarzan "The Ape Man and the Mangani" (Thomas) contains perhaps the most racist portrayal of Arabs in comic books this author has encountered. "Fire Desert—Devils...," challenges Tarzan to the group of Arabs aiming their rifles at him on the comic's cover. The magazine's subtitle? "Apes vs. Arab Raiders with Tarzan caught between them in a duel to the death!" The story opens with Tarzan, searching for his beloved Jane, who has been kidnapped by Arabs. Tarzan enlists the apes as helpers. He and his furry friends reach the outskirts of the Arab encampment, slay several Arabs and don their kuffiyehs. Says the ape leader, "I do not understand, Tarzan. What good is it to put on these EVIL-SMELLING RAGS?" The message is clear: these apes are cleaner, more civilized than the Arabs. As they slip through the camp, Tarzan overhears the malicious Achmet Zek saying: "And, with the morning, you will take the WOMAN from the far tent and SELL her north. She will bring A PRETTY PRICE here—because she is WHO SHE IS." Tarzan hears a woman's scream. He rushes to the tent where his beloved is held. Upon arrival, he gives a cry of anger. The stench of the head ape Taglort fills the chamber. The ape has betrayed him!

The Arabs, hearing Tarzan's howl, think there must be a beast within, and saturate the tent with bullets. "FIRE into the tent!" they scream. Tarzan escapes; the Arabs manage to slay one of their own. The Arabs appear as demons, red faced, hooked-nosed, with bulbous eyes and scraggly beards. The comic ends with Tarzan chasing after Taglort the ape, just as he pursued Achmet Zet the Arab. Thus, Arabs are equated with Apes. The only difference? The apes have better hygiene.

In Sgt. Rock "Traitor's Blood!" a World War II American tank battalion in the North African desert heads towards a nomad village whose sheikh has promised them information on the location of Rommel's camp. On the village outskirts a short, ugly Arab (whom the Americans refer to as "the little guy in the bedsheets") introduces them

to the head sheikh. This unsavory Arab sports a goatee, a shadowed, bulbous brow, and a dark, double chin. A line of bullets is strapped across his breast.

"We're Americans, sheikh—sent here on your request on your offering to help the allies!" Says the sheikh, "I have come by VITAL INFORMATION CONCERNING THE Germans' tank movement. The Nazis have demanded we help THEM...CAN YOU IMAGINE? Help THEM against my friends? RIDICULOUS!"

Later, a beautiful belly dancer calls to Sgt. Rock: "Your LIFE and the lives of YOUR MEN are in mortal danger! The sheikh is NOT what he seems to be! He helps NO ONE—but HIMSELF! a traitor to all! He secretly dispatched a messenger to the Nazis...who will attack! Even while he entertains you!"

Convinced of the plot, the sergeant and his men switch clothes with the Arabs. Later that night, the Nazis arrive. They note what seem to be the shadows of American troops within the tent and open fire: all the evil Arabs die. Too late the Nazis learn of their mistake. The comic concludes with Sgt. Rock and company throwing off their Arab garb and dispensing with the Germans.

Arab Sex Roles

The Arab male's attitude towards females (both foreign or native) as portrayed in comics, carries a warning: Woe to the woman who is abducted by an Arab. If she is herself an Arab, she is doomed to one of two illustrations, either a scantily-clad and salivated-upon belly dancer, or a faceless housewife, whose thick-set form is bundled up in dark robes. As dancer, the woman may temporarily attract the attentions of some virile superhero. As a housewife, alas, she is doomed to insignificance, a total non-entity. Her most important role (and this can be said, in part, for belly dancers as well) is part of the setting in which the action takes place. The housewife, unlike the dancer, never speaks, is never spoken to. Voiceless, featureless and mindless, she is devoid of personality. Such being the case, the wife is noticed by none—hero, heroine or villain.

I submit the opening frame of Checkmate "Welcome to Qurac!" (Dupperberg). The setting is El Kuwait, Qurac, 6:42 p.m. Arab men populate the background. Heads wrapped in turbans and headdresses, they wave their arms enthusiastically, marketing their wares. Clearly this is a *suq* (bazaar). In the foreground, a heavily draped woman walks with a basket of fruit on her head. The figure is totally featureless, the gray-black folds of her robes covering every inch of the body, including the face. The being resembles a piece of furniture

covered with sheets in a deserted house. A similarly garbed figure can be seen in the background. Apparently both beings possess X-ray vision, for the cloth that drapes their faces appears heavy and possesses no eye slits. Reads the hero's caption: "I've gathered my groceries like a good little Quaracin housewife and no one's giving me a second look. Why should they? Women aren't treated much better than cattle here. It gives me a great cover." Basically, this is the lot of the Arab woman in comics. Her presence in the storyline is indeed like cattle in fields.

In G.I. Combat "Stop at the Corner of Hades" an American G.I. is smitten with an Arab woman. The story opens with the Americans paratrooping a tank division into the North African desert in search of Nazis. The G.I.s spot a light over the horizon which turns out to be a giant bonfire—a great funeral pyre upon which a beautiful young woman mourns a dead man. Arab tribesmen garbed in headdresses and robes form a circle around the scene. One Arab ignites the base of the pyre. The leader proclaims—"Princess Azeela...You must join your dead husband—Prince Akmed—as is our people's custom. LIGHT THE FUNERAL FIRE!" It has never been an Arab tradition to encourage a widow to immolate herself upon the death of her husband. But these comic tribesmen begin to implement this horrible ritual. Suddenly, an American G.I. proceeds to rescue her. "The infidel is contaminating our holy place! STOP HIM!" screams the Arab leader. Warns the beautiful princess: "The-the Mufti will set the people AGAINST you!" Adds the soldier, reaching out his arms to grasp her: "You're too beautiful to die, princess!"

Enraged, the mufti screams: They will use Princess Azeela "to win your support against our REAL friends, the NAZIS! AND I WILL PROVE IT!" Satanic in appearance and sinister in gesture, the mufti continues: "Is it not the Zahillan custom that any man who saves a widow's life is responsible for her? But the American will NEVER marry one of our tribe! HE will only use Princess Azeela as a toy and cast her aside when she is no further use to him!" Enraptured by the lovely maiden, the G.I. agrees to marry her right then and there. The mufti, secretly enraged, must conduct the ceremony before his assembled tribesmen.

The princess, as brave as she is beautiful, accompanies the G.I. into combat. Later, the mufti, with "demonic eyes livid with bottomless hatred," attempts to shoot the G.I. Shielding her husband with her body, the princess cries: "NO...NO Mufti! You will not harm him..." She is shot dead. It is not the Nazis who are the enemies of the happiness of these maidens, but their kin. Arab men are evil.

In Moon Knight "Spirits in the Sand" (Moench) Jellim Yussaf, a man with squinting eyes and a set of teeth that are not only incomplete but yellow and misshapen as if his gums are too rotten to hold them, greets Moon Knight's beautiful blonde girlfriend, Marlene Alraune, at the Sudan airport. That night Yussaf breaks into Marlene's bedroom, abducting her. They make an odd couple, these two. One blonde, fair, smooth-complexioned, delicately featured, clad in scanty underwear, wholly vulnerable; the other, dark-haired, bearded, with brutish features and permanently squinting eyes (very much resembling archaic Oriental villains), wrapped in robes and brandishing a crooked dagger. Eventually, Moon Knight saves the day and Yussaf is slain. But the reader is hardpressed to forget the image of the uncouth, malicious Yussaf threatening the lovely heroine. It is a prevalent theme: ugly Arab males holding captive beautiful Western women.

In Action Comics (Byrne and Kupperberg) Sheikh Khareemali's wants to buy reporter Lois Lane. Interviewing the sheikh, spunky reporter Lane asks, "You have a problem with women?" Answers the Quracan minister of Defense: "Indeed, NOT...in their PROPER place. The females of Qurac KNOW that place. UNLIKE their American cousins." As his soldiers pin Lois to the wall, Khareemali removes his riding crop and prepares to strike her with it, saying "It is time you learned that lesson! Hold her steady!" The message is clear: Quracan women are treated as slaves in their homeland, routinely ordered about and beaten if they question a man's statement.

At story's end, when Khareemali is escorted to his private jet preparing to leave the country, the sheikh raises his fist at Lois, saying: "But know this, woman...you will still be punished for your impudence. I shall not forget it!" Answers Lois: "Better do as the man says before I forget I'm a lady, SLEEZEBAG." It is with great pleasure, then, that the reader watches Khareemali's plane explode to smithereens a few frames later. Justice has been done.

Conclusion

Such a gross imbalance in the portrayal of an ethnic group leads to the inevitable question: Why? There is no single answer to this query. Rather, the status quo is due to a number of factors. Perhaps the greatest of these is ignorance. The average American knows little about Arabs of the Arab world; those involved in the creation and publication of comic books are clearly no exception. One need only to recall the instances in *Batman: A Death in the Family* where Batman addresses the Arabs not in Arabic but in Farsi. The second factor is that the number of Arab-Americans is relatively few, approximately three million. Hence,

unflattering Arab stereotypes are rarely challenged. A third factor is greed. Illustrators and storytellers are able to make a profit with negative Arab portraits. Exposure is a fourth consideration; few Americans of Arab heritage work in the profession.

A fifth factor is politics. As Bowling Green State University Professor Ray Browne says, "Comics are used to teach reading and writing as well as political ideology." The United States has chosen Israel as its ally par excellence in the Middle East. Some storytellers perceive U.S. interests as being linked with Israel's. For decades, popular culture's imagemakers have perpetuated a stale myth: If Arabs are allied against Israel then they are allied against America, and thus Israel's enemies become *our* enemies. It should come as no surprise then that we find Arabs attempting to blow up Times Square (The Punisher). Since Arabs are America's villains in comics, shouldn't American superheroes thrash them at will?

A sixth factor is fear. The characterization of Arabs as bandits, desert nomads, greedy sheikhs and terrorists is a longstanding one. These images have become part of the folklore. Breaking with traditional stereotypes may bring criticism instead of praise. And imagemakers may fear the loss of the Arab as convenient villain. If not the Arab, who, in short, will be their bad guy? Finally, silence plays a role. Academics, critics and imagemakers have, to date, not been critical of the pervasive portraits.

But enough of "why?" Rather, let us ask how might this imbalance be altered? Dialogue with imagemakers and executives should follow. Disagreeable portraits should be met with personal meetings, letters and phone calls which express displeasure and outrage. Concerned scholars could help persuade the industry that racist depictions of Arabs are as morally reprehensible as racist images of other groups.

Comic book portraits do not exist in a vacuum. Each week, comics are read by more than 150 million impressionable children and young adults, many of whom identify with the superheroes and heroines. In today's super $275 million industry, the average comic book reader is 21 years old and spends approximately $10 a week on comics. Those in the industry are perhaps more aware of the power of their creations to impress than anyone else. Writes DC Comics editor Dennis O'Neill in the postscript to *Batman: A Death in the Family*:

> But these sagas (comic books) are more than just entertainment, at least to many readers; they are the post-industrial equivalent of folk tales and as such, they have gone pretty deeply into a lot of psyches.

Yet, in DC Comics' *A Death in the Family* and in other DC publications, Arabs appear less than human.

The Arab comic book caricature is a fallacy which does an injustice to a people who have made tremendous contributions to society. Contrary to comic depictions, Arabs are intelligent, educated, peace-loving people numbering more than 200 million from North Africa, Southwest Asia and the Arabian peninsula, 65 percent of whom are under 20 years of age. Most men and women who reside in 21 Arab countries are poor; they have never seen an oil well, lived in a harem or a desert tent or ridden a camel. By continually portraying Arabs as villainous, comic books form an obstacle to understanding the Arab's humanity. No one benefits when people are dehumanized.

The time is long overdue for the stereotype to be retired to the Acme Comic Book Graveyard. The ultimate result should be an Arab image which depicts a fellow human being with all the potential and frailties that condition implies.

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